

2011 GAZETTE WRITING CONTEST WINNER

Dead Poet On MacDougal Street

By Kevin Lambert

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It was the kind of bright, crisp winter's afternoon that beckoned you outside, at least for short periods. I had been glad to walk from the Village to the old Brownstone on 35th Street, at which point I was just as glad to be inside.

Nero Wolfe, 300 plus pounds, as well padded as a small dinosaur, was sipping beer and speaking.

"I'm not sure I would call it poetry, even though poetry is meant to be read aloud with musical accompaniment. *Beowulf* was presented in song. But that poem told a story, which I fail to recognize in a bongo drum accompanying lines like 'Oh America, when will we be worthy of your million Trotskyites?'"

Wolfe rang for another beer. I leaned back. Archie Goodwin, a natty, muscular guy with an aggressive chin, was seated at another desk on the side of the room. It was Goodwin who had made the appointment with his famous boss. But Wolfe was meeting with me as a personal favor to Gregory French, a novelist who lived across the street from me. He wrote complicated fiction that few people even checked out of the libraries, let alone paid good money for.

"Mr. French is a writer I hold in great esteem," Wolfe had said. "He asked me if I would look into your problem, and I could not refuse. He has dined at my table. Two of his books have a place on my shelves. He told me that, on the basis of one of your plays, he has discerned what he called a "kernel of true insight buried under a mound of drivel."

"I guess I'll take that as a compliment," I said, lightly.

"Do so," he said. "Esteem is hard to come by in the world of letters. Don't disparage it."

Goodwin cleared his throat. "Mr. Winthrop has had four of his plays produced, but they didn't make a lot of money. None, in fact. But he

recently made the acquaintance of a theatrical angel, who advanced him **\$10,000**” — Goodwin looked at me — **“that was the amount, sir?”**

I nodded. I didn't blame him for being skeptical. I was having trouble believing it myself. Ten thousand is what a successful square pulls down in a year.

“To write three plays,” Goodwin continued.

“This has caused a lot of jealousy on the part of my roommate,” I said. “His name is Harold. Harold Harold, actually. He thought having the same first and last names would make him memorable, something like William Carlos Williams. But he is, like, bothering me, to the extent that I can't concentrate on the plays I have been commissioned to write. He is actually deliberately sabotaging me. And my work. He is always badgering me, yelling when I'm trying to think, banging on pots and pans and playing stuff like Lawrence Welk records.”

“Why suffer it?” Wolfe asked. “Surely \$10,000 is sufficient capital for you to set up elsewhere.”

“You can get a furnished room in the Village for \$15 a week,” Goodwin said. His tone, along with his Harris Tweed suit, told me what he thought of the idea.

“I can't move because Harold won't be able to pay the rent on his own. He's a poet, and unpublished poet, with all the income that that implies. I owe him a lot. In fact I owe him my present life. Which I guess would include the 10 grand. We went to high school together, and he set an example for me. I don't expect guys like you to be sympathetic, but he showed me that the American Dream comes with an underground, and it can be productive. And it can be a lot of fun. Then, when he came here, in 1951, he wrote me, and convinced me to move to Greenwich Village. I was working in a Ford plant in Detroit. I took his advice and came here and found it was the only place on earth I could live. He was the cat who introduced me to the music of Dizzy Gillespie.”

Wolfe shuddered, quite a sight with so much to shudder with.

“It could really hurt him, Mr. Wolfe, it might even kill him. And I would have that on my conscience for the rest of my life. What I am asking you to do is to speak to him rationally. Explain the situation. A third party — especially a third party with your intellect and reputation — is always more credible.

“I'm willing to pay \$500,” I said. “For a 30-minute talk with another highly intelligent human being.”

Wolfe grunted and gave Goodwin a look. Then he turned to me.

“Nietzsche said that posthumous men are not as well understood as timely men, but they are listened to better,” Wolfe said. “That role seems eminently suited to poets. They are not known for longevity — perhaps you could exercise some patience, and wait for his posthumous fame.”

I goggled. This was Wolfe’s legendary disinclination to do any work. I thought for a second. “Well, what about T.S. Eliot? He’s been around forever. He’s heard pretty well. What about Yeats? What about Wordsworth? Weren’t they honored in their lifetimes? Wordsworth lived to about 80, didn’t he? And there’s Greg French himself. He’s pushing 70.”

The mention of French’s name reminded Wolfe why he was suffering my presence in the first place. He sighed, taking in enough air to float a weather balloon. Then he closed his eyes. If Goodwin’s books were any indication, he was calculating how many orchids he needed, how much he had to pay Goodwin, Fritz, the chef, and Theodore, the orchid nurse.

He sighed again.

“Archie,” he said. “Your notebook.”

CHAPTER 2

Goodwin wanted to walk back to the Village, and I obliged him, although I insisted that we stop about halfway for a hot drink. He had a glass of milk.

I didn’t know what to make of him. His stories about Wolfe, published in book form and serialized in *Manhattan Gumshoe*, were lively and well-written, but he struck me as the kind of guy who didn’t read anything more than Esquire once a month. He asked me if I was a beatnik.

“I never use that term,” I replied. “And I don’t know anyone who does. Except reporters.”

“So how do you classify yourself?” he asked.

“Just a writer with a goatee who lives in the Village. And digs chicks.”

We reached the Village and walked to MacDougal Street, where Harold and I shared the flat. As we walked in, and flicked on the light, Goodwin grabbed my arm.

“Don’t move,” he whispered. “Something’s wrong.”

“Huh?”

“Shut up,” he hissed, and he meant it.

Taking his handkerchief, he started moving slowly through the room. As far as I could see, nothing was wrong.

Then I saw Harold.

He was sitting in his chair, as always, with a copy of Shakespeare's sonnets on his lap, the same way I had seen him a thousand times. He wasn't reading, however, nor would he ever read anything again. Blood had dripped down to the pages, landing on the phrase “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

Living in the Village for some years, I had seen a lot of odd things, but they were more like Neal Cassady hanging naked from a chandelier singing “Mairzy Doats.” This one struck me speechless.

Not Goodwin. He turned on me, angrily. “Is this your idea of being cute?” he snapped. “Did you shoot him and try to drag us in as some kind of an alibi?”

I found my voice. “Mr. Goodwin, I didn't shoot Harold. He was my best friend. Like, we were buddies.”

Goodwin stepped over and abruptly started frisking me. As someone who gets roused by the cops once a month, I know a frisk, and he did a clean quick job of it. Then he went into the bedrooms, and looked them over. Nobody was hiding anywhere.

“I'm not carrying a gun,” he said. “I didn't think I'd need one for a talk with an unpublished poet.”

Right, I thought. It's the published ones you have to watch out for. But I merely nodded.

“This is getting complicated,” he said. He moved to the phone, hesitated, and walked to the door.

“Come on,” he said. “We're calling Mr. Wolfe, and you're staying where I can see you.”

We went.

CHAPTER 3

There was a phone booth in Reggio's, and Goodwin kept me right in front of him, leaving the door open as he dialed.

He got an answer and spoke.

“Me. Complications. The poet in question will now have a chance at posthumous fame.”

I couldn't hear Wolfe's reply, but it gave every indication of being a loud one.

“Yes, sir. No, I have no idea about that. That's your department. I fetch, carry, escort, and report. And now I need instructions.”

There was quite a pause while Wolfe either sat there thinking things over or told Goodwin what to do.

He hung up, inserted another nickel, and dialed another number. Also from memory.

“Hello? I want to report a murder.”

Sergeant Purley Stebbins was bigger than Goodwin, running a bit to fat, **with a harsh, intimidating cop's voice and unfriendly eyes. I had the feeling that if I told him a joke he would clap me in protective custody.**

He was listening to Goodwin's report, and he didn't seem to be buying it. But he would probably have the same reaction to the news that Calvin Coolidge wasn't president anymore.

“Then I called you,” Goodwin was saying, finishing up what I thought was a well-edited, straightforward recitation.

Stebbins grunted and turned to me.

“So, Mr. Winthrop. You'll notice that Goodwin here didn't say that you shot the deceased yourself and then tried to rope him and Wolfe in as an alibi.”

I didn't reply. I had, as I've said, pretty much monthly interruptions by the cops since I moved into the Village and grew my goatee.

“Let's go downtown, Winthrop, and take a paraffin test.”

“Be glad to,” I replied. It would show if I had fired a gun recently, if they read the results correctly and honestly, which I seriously doubted. But I wasn’t going to say no.

“I’ll come along,” said Goodwin, suddenly cheerful. “If Mr. Winthrop, who is still a client, would happen to fall down a flight of stairs, I can be there to catch him.”

Stebbins gave Goodwin a black look. **“You’re clowning for what *this* guy can pay you?” he snarled.**

“Sometimes I do my job just for art’s sake,” he replied, and my opinion of him shot way up.

CHAPTER 4

Sixteen hours later, we were finishing a meal at Wolfe’s Brownstone. It was *confit de canard*, with *sauce rouennaise*, which I thought was okay until Wolfe told me it was made with goose blood. It was quite unlike my usual diet of hot dogs, beer and Chinese carryout. Wolfe, who won’t discuss business at meals, had led us through a discussion of Schopenhauer’s influence on 20th century Western literature. My position was that anyone that pessimistic probably had a greater influence on the murder rate.

We had just moved to the office when the doorbell rang. Goodwin, clearly having heard enough about German philosophers for the day, went to answer.

“It’s the man about the chair,” he said upon returning.

Wolfe made an exasperated sigh.

“Confound it.” He looked at me.

“Mr. Winthrop, Inspector Cramer of Homicide South is at the door. I can admit him, but I can give you the opportunity to leave by the back door.”

“I just spend half a day with the cops. I think they’re done with me. I’ll stay.”

Wolfe shrugged. **“As you wish.” He nodded to Goodwin.**

Inspector Cramer was even bigger than Stebbins, and every bit as humorless, with cold gray eyes. He sat down in the red leather chair, looking at me, Goodwin, and Wolfe.

“Will you have some beer, Mr. Cramer?” Wolfe asked.

“Why is this beatnik still your client?” he asked, ignoring the offer. “Don’t you favor Park Avenue dowagers and rich slobs?”

“Mr. Cramer. Mr. Winthrop, who is in a position to know, informed me that the term ‘beatnik’ was coined by a San Francisco gossip columnist named Herb Caen. This puts it alongside any other word invented by a tabloid writer. For instance, Presleymania.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” Cramer said.

“My answer would be that I am under no obligation to inform you of my motives for maintaining clients or anything else.”

Cramer pulled out a cigar, unwrapped it, set it between his teeth, and threw the wrapper at Wolfe’s wastebasket. He missed.

“Here’s how I see this Harold case,” he said. “Winthrop here knew about paraffin tests so of course he didn’t fire the gun. Or at least not without rubber gloves on. A pair of which,” he said, looking straight at me, “Lt. Rowcliffe just found at the crime scene.”

“Indeed. Were they tested for gunpowder residue?”

“They’re being tested now.”

“Were they in some way linked to my client?”

Cramer grunted. “Not yet. And let me finish. Prints were wiped off, everywhere, in that place. It got a real thorough rub and we didn’t find any but Harold’s. It’s probably the cleanest beatnik hovel in New York.”

“Why would Mr. Winthrop wipe off his own fingerprints? He lived there.”

“I think maybe he was hopped-up on something. He just started wiping prints and couldn’t stop.”

Cramer bit deeper into his cigar.

“Now,” he said, “I think there was some professional jealousy here, just like Winthrop said. And I think it just got out of hand. And I think Winthrop pulled his gun and shot Harold. Then I think he came over here with this story, so Goodwin would find the body.”

“Which presupposes that Mr. Winthrop thought himself clever enough to gull both Mr. Goodwin and myself,” Wolfe replied. “Very risky. He could have used the same story and enlisted the aid of a coffeehouse waitress.”

Wolfe sipped some coffee.

“May I ask, have you found the murder weapon?”

“We have not, and that fact alone is keeping Mr. Winthrop from another trip downtown. And a longer stay.” Cramer looked at me.

“Don’t leave town. Don’t let Wolfe talk you into any of his schemes. And, finally, get yourself a lawyer.” He turned to Wolfe.

“And if you want my opinion,” he said, “getting yourself involved with these beatniks is a lot different than uptown murders. They’re all hopped-up and the only work they ever do is to pound on bongos. Or they sit around and read weird books and drink beer.” Cramer stood up.

“I can see how you’d get along with them,” he snarled.

He walked out. Goodwin followed him to the door, where, I was told, he retrieved his own hat and coat.

Later, in Wolfe’s office, I was explaining my movements of the day before the murder.

“There was a gathering at our place,” I told him. “Just a few people. Actually, everyone who knew Harold was there.”

“Indeed,” said Wolfe. “Who attended?”

“My theatrical angel, Mr. Frederson. And Harold's three friends.”

“I would like to see them. Can you, assisted by Mr. Goodwin, have them all here at 9:00 p.m.?”

“What?”

“Mr. Wolfe needs to speak to them,” Goodwin said, “and the sooner the better.” He gestured to his desk. “And the phone is there.”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Please try,” Wolfe said, and opened his book, which was *Only in America*, by Harry Golden.

CHAPTER 5

Fritz and Goodwin had arranged a fine reception. Every kind of drink one could imagine was either on a tray or on call. Precisely at 9:00 p.m. **the guests, if that's the word I want, began to arrive. If Wolfe thought that that was pretty punctual for a bunch of hopped-up bongo players, he didn't mention it.**

Fred Frederson, my theatrical angel. He was sitting in the red leather chair. He was heir to the truly fabulous Motor City Truck Trailer fortune, estimated to be somewhere between \$40 and \$50 million. He was known as a serious theatrical investor, in that he subsidized writers, not showgirls. He was in his mid-40s, a bachelor, with an apartment on Park Avenue and a mansion on Long Island. He was wearing a ruffled, off-the-rack suit, on the theory that someone that rich could wear anything he wanted.

Linda Montieth. She was a photographer, responsible for filling the pages of a lot of theatrical playbills and publications. She had been one of **Harold's best friends, although there had never been any talk of romance.** She was in her mid-20s and overweight, but nowhere near **Wolfe's league. Her extra pounds made her round and attractive.** She was, in fact, currently divorcing her third husband.

Elizabeth Van Sween, an acquaintance of mine and sort of a friend of **Harold's. A very slender brunette, dressed entirely in shapeless black denim,** she might have been attractive if she stopped biting her fingernails and took off her oversized glasses, which she didn't need. She was eccentric even by Village standards. She considered herself a poet, but was so contemptuous of the decadent capitalist publishing complex that **she expressed her disgust by not writing any. Known as "Thin Lizzie."**

Josh Holstein. He was a folk singer, often seen in Washington Square, singing and strumming his guitar. He made his living by making tours of the coffee houses, approaching anyone who looked like they had **money, and offering to "sell" them an original song, for "whatever you think it's worth."** Then he would sing it. Tall, gangly, looking a bit like a whooping crane, he had a high, reedy voice that got on your nerves and stayed there. Few people have thought his songs were worth a whole lot.

"Mr. Frederson," said Wolfe, "we will start with you. How well did you know Mr. Harold?"

"I didn't really know him at all," Frederson replied. He had a soft manner of speaking. "That gathering was our first meeting." He cleared his throat. "He wanted to interest me in an epic poem he had written. As you can imagine, this sort of thing happens a lot. I told him that I only

finance playwrights. And their occasional play that I feel has literary merit.”

“The most recent being, ‘Thurl! Thurl! Why is the Narrator girl??’ with a cast of 13 midgets?” Wolfe asked.

He nodded. Not with real pride, I thought, but he nodded.

“May I ask your criteria?” Wolfe said.

“Whatever triggers some sort of insight,” Frederson replied. Mr. Winthrops’s last play, ‘Requiem for a Hep-Cat,’ did just that.”

“Indeed,” Wolfe said. He looked at me. “Congratulations,” he muttered. Turning back to Frederson, he said, “Was Mr. Harold overbearing in his presentation or did he accept your rejections equably?”

“He actually went from tenacious to irritating. He kept coming back to his epic poem, casting it in a slightly different light. I told him, again and again, that I was uninterested in the genre itself.” He paused. “I don’t like to speak ill of the dead.”

“People do that all the time,” Wolfe said. “Few among us have a good word for Hitler or Stalin.”

“I would hardly compare Harold to those two,” said Linda. Wolfe turned his head to face hers.

“May I ask your relationship with Mr. Harold, Madam?”

“He was a dear friend,” she replied. “I sometimes brought him along on photo-shoots as an assistant. He wasn’t skilled; I just needed an extra pair of hands sometimes. But he needed the work. It helped him pay his rent.” She shot me a meaningful look. “Which is far more than Mr. Winthrop ever did.”

“I don’t think I could have used an assistant playwright,” I said. “And I don’t use a light meter.”

“Perhaps if you used *something* to keep you on point your cast might not have outnumbered your audience!” she snapped. I turned to Wolfe.

“If you’re wondering how she’s managed to go through three husbands at the age of 26, this might explain — ”

“If you please,” Wolfe said, holding up a palm. “Miss Montieth, during the course of your friendship with Mr. Harold, did he ever reciprocate your good deeds and find the occasional assignment for you?”

“No. He was not well connected in that way. Or in any way, actually.” She looked at Wolfe, trying to make him understand. “He was a *poet*, Mr. Wolfe. Not a sycophant. Or a courtier,” she said, looking at me, stressing the word.

“Did anyone, to your knowledge, dislike him enough to kill him?”

“No,” she said. “Not at all.”

Wolfe turned to Thin Lizzie. “Miss Van Sween. Why were you invited to this gathering?”

She didn’t answer. She stared at Wolfe, which she had been doing since she sat down.

“Miss Van Sween?”

“You’re far out,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’ve got flowers all over the place and you wear yellow shirts and socks and you’re so fat you could create a whole new species of human being. Circular humans. Far out. I’ve been writing a poem about you, while I’ve been sitting here. But I’m not going to recite it. I’m not even going to write it down. But it lives. It lives forever in the air we breathe. Shiva hears it.”

There was a substantial pause, which Wolfe finally broke.

“Thank you for not reciting it.”

“Once a poem is recited,” she said, “just anybody could hear it. Misinterpret it. Twist it to their own purposes. Look what happened to Nietzsche.”

“Thank you for that. If I may, could I ask you where you were yesterday at 4 p.m.?”

“I was sitting in a coffeehouse. I was thinking.”

“Of course. Did anybody see you?”

“See me think? I doubt it. Who can see the mental processes?”

“How about your physical being?”

“Oh sure. Everybody saw me. Everybody’s always staring at me. They’re jealous of me.”

“Indeed. Was Mr. Harold jealous of you?”

“Of course he was. My poems didn’t get rejected by every cheap press in New York.”

“They would be if you wrote them down and sent them in,” said Linda, wearily. “And if your rich father didn’t send you a check every month, you’d be waiting tables like everybody else!”

“I don’t write things down. How could I possibly take lunch orders?”

Wolfe, according to Goodwin’s books, had an extremely low tolerance even for normal women, but here he was being as patient as a social worker. I made a mental note to buy Greg French a bottle of champagne.

“What were your feelings toward Mr. Harold?”

“He was all right,” she replied. “But I didn’t really like him. But then, I don’t really like anybody.”

“Why, then, did you attend? Why were you even invited?”

“Obviously, since they were there to suck after mammon, Ralph and Harold were trying to inject some class into the gathering.”

“My God!” Linda yelled. “You’ve got about as much class as a nose-bleed!”

Wolfe sighed. “I would like to pose a general question. Does any one of you own a gun?”

“I do,” said Josh, the folk singer. He did, too. He may have been an easygoing folk singer, but he was also a World War II veteran, and had in fact been in on the D-Day landings.

Wolfe nodded. “What sort?”

“A Luger. A souvenir. They were the top keepsakes. I took it off a dead Kraut. He was playing possum, lying in a bunch of bodies after an artillery attack. It’s an old Kraut trick. We were supposed to shoot them anyway, when we saw ‘em like that, so I had him covered. Then I saw him

blink, so I plugged him. He screamed, then he croaked. I went over, and he had this Luger in his hand. He was gonna take me out with it. I had another Luger for a time, but I traded it with my topkick for three cartons of Luckies.”

“Indeed,” Wolfe said. “May I offer my congratulations? And yet, you spend your time singing songs of peace and understanding in Washington Square.”

“So would you, if you’d been through what I been through.”

I stifled a snicker. The image of Nero Wolfe, strumming a guitar and singing “Root Hog and Die” was a bit too much for me.

“Mr. Holstein,” Wolfe asked. “What sort of a friendship did you enjoy with Mr. Harold?”

Holstein shrugged. “I just knew him. Sometimes he’d sit and listen when I was singing in the park.”

“What occasioned you to attend this social event?”

“Ralph here told me about it. Free beer, he said. That’s all I need.”

Wolfe nodded. “Did Mr. Harold speak to you at any length?”

“Yeah. He talked about how unfair the world is, what with Ralph getting 10 grand and him having to go around trying to sell his poems to tourists.”

“Isn’t that the source of your income as well?”

He smiled. “Well, if you’re asking if I thought he was cutting in on my turf and that I shot him to clear the field, I think my best day, in the last six years, brought in eight bucks.”

“The French writers compete so viciously because they are all fighting for a piece of a very small pie,” Wolfe said.

“Robbe-Grillet never took a potshot at Sartre,” he replied. “And he knows how to use a gun.”

Wolfe looked around the room.

“Here is another general question. Who hated Mr. Harold enough to kill him?”

Nobody had any thoughts on that.

“Well,” Wolfe said, “I will see what I can do with these slivers of information. Meanwhile permit me to say that if this sort of gathering is representative of anything to come in American literature or theatre, we might as well move into a cave with a television.

“Good evening.” He turned his back on them and picked up his book.

“Far out,” said Thin Lizzie.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 6

Archie Goodwin closed the door on the departing guests and returned to the office. Winthrop had gone along with his friends. He had a lot of apartment cleaning to do. Nero Wolfe was reading.

“Well,” Goodwin said. “That certainly cleared things up. I never would have suspected that Robbe-Grillet and Sartre were on the outs. Congratulations.”

No reply.

“Yes sir,” he continued. “And I think we should add ‘far out’ to the business cards. Think of all the wealthy hep cats ...well, beating a path to our door.”

“Archie,” Wolfe replied, “Shut up.”

“Yes sir. If you were to ask me, it’s Frederson. He was worried that Harold Harold would distract Winthrop from attaining his nuances of insight. Me, I hate that. I can see him flying into as homicidal rage.”

The doorbell rang. Archie looked at the clock.

“Send whoever it is away,” Wolfe snapped.

“It’s only ten-thirty. The cats and chicks are probably coming back for an all-night party, with poetry, wine, and Dizzy Gillespie’s new album.”

Goodwin, who had a keen sense of when to stop, did so, and went to answer the door.

Upon returning, he spoke. "I was wrong. The cat at the door is definitely not far out. Mr. Cornelius Van Sween. I put him in the front room."

"No!" Wolfe bellowed.

"He's the father of Elizabeth Van Sween."

"Send him my condolences and escort him out."

"You know, of course, that I checked these people. Van Sween is president of Omega Electronics, which supplies parts to most of the TV and radio manufacturers in America, and what's left over gets sold to the Air Force. He lives alone on Park Avenue, except when he's at his summer home on an island in Maine, which he owns. He insists upon speaking with you."

"Confound it!" Wolfe snarled. After a long pause, he told Goodwin to admit the visitor.

Cornelius Van Sween was tall, and, considering his age and his upper crust diet, still trim. His graying hair was cut in a Princeton and his clothes represented close to a thousand dollars. He didn't seem to be any more of a hand shaker than Wolfe was, and he sat down in the red leather chair.

"The evening is well advanced," Wolfe said. "Will you have some refreshment?"

"Vodka on the rocks," he said, decisively, which is what one would expect from the boss.

Fritz had gone to his room, so Goodwin made one, along with a beer for Wolfe.

"Thank you," he said, in the tone he patently used for servants everywhere. He inclined his head in Goodwin's direction.

"Please dismiss your man. I have something of a personal nature to discuss."

A corner of Wolfe's mouth went up. "Of course," he said. "You may go, Goodwin."

Goodwin, quick on the uptake as ever, merely said, "Very good, sir," left the room, and proceeded to the listening post behind the wall.

“Wolfe,” Van Sween began, “I understand that my daughter was here tonight.”

“That’s surprising. How would you know of that?”

“That’s my business. I repeat the question.”

“I withhold the answer. I am under no obligation to report anything whatsoever to you.”

“I anticipated that. A ploy to get money, of course. How much?”

“I see that you inhabit the world, and go by the dictum, that every man has his price. I’m sure I do as well, but not in this instance.”

“Come on, Wolfe. My daughter was seen leaving this house not half an hour ago. I demand to know. I’m well within my rights to know if my daughter is in some kind of trouble with the law.”

“You may be within your rights to know, but I have no obligation to enlighten you.” Wolfe sipped his beer. “Let us look at this from another angle. You have, with whatever sources of information available to you, been informed that she was in my house. Patently, you have been having her followed, by another detective agency.”

“Yes. The Bascom agency. When they called and told me she was in here. I came straight over. I waited outside in my car and saw her leave. With that motley band of misfits and weirdoes. So I came in.”

“You would have done better to simply stop her and ask her what she was doing.”

“She wouldn’t have answered. She hardly ever speaks to me. And when she does, I can’t make any sense out of what she’s saying.”

“Indeed. I had a similar experience.”

“I send her money, every month. She certainly doesn’t refuse that. And that’s the only lifeline I have with her.” He seemed to lose a bit of his high-powered businessman persona. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“What has caused her animus?”

“God knows,” Van Sween replied. “She once called me a running dog lackey of the capitalist warmongers. Another time she called me unworthy of America’s million Trotskyites. What I should do is hire you to find that out. What her problem is with her father.”

“I’m afraid,” Wolfe said, “that you would find my talents unsuited for that particular task.”

“We’ll discuss that later. What I want to know is if she is in some kind of trouble. She may dismiss me now, but if she can keep out of jail until she grows up, I might get her back. And I’m willing to step in and look after her until then. And I want to know, right now, if she is in immediate danger of arrest.” He reached into his briefcase. “Shall we say \$5,000, for a retainer?”

Wolfe sighed. Having to work always did that to him.

“Mr. Van Sween, I must inform you that I already have a client. One who would be perfectly satisfied to see your daughter in danger of arrest.”

“Dump him. I can pay better,” Van Sween snapped, captain of industry having crept back in.

“It may not have to come down to a choice like that,” Wolfe said. “I cannot dump a client when a better paying one comes along. Such a mendacious about-face would ruin both my standing in my profession and my own self-esteem, both of which are considerable. But my current client has hired me to investigate a murder and place the blame on the guilty party. A certain —”

“Murder???” Van Sween snapped. “Did you say *murder*???”

Wolfe nodded. “A man, an unpublished poet named Harold Harold, was murdered yesterday. My client is the main suspect. So, shifting the blame to your daughter is definitely an option.”

Van Sween was having a hard time taking this in. “But murder? Why would Elizabeth murder some poet? Why should *anybody* murder some poet, for crying out loud? Who cares two figs about them in the first place?”

“I couldn’t say, just yet,” Wolfe replied. “But think it only fair to tell you that she is not the first suspect on my list.”

“And how much,” Van Sween said, chairman of the board in full flower by now, “would it cost to keep her off the list altogether?”

Wolfe leaned back and exhaled. “That, sir, is not how I operate. I expose crimes without prejudice or monetary considerations. I am usually fortunate, or wily, enough to pick my clients with that in mind.”

“You mean you’ll take a client on only if you believe in their innocence?”

Wolfe nodded. “And I believe, although not with any certitude, from our brief acquaintance, that your daughter did not kill that man. The crime was not ineptly performed — fingerprints were wiped away, the murder weapon was removed — actions I would put well outside your daughter’s organizational skills.”

Van Sween didn’t take offense. In fact, he nodded in complete agreement.

“So, Wolfe, can you serve two masters? To do basically the same thing? I don’t mind telling you that Elizabeth is all right living in obscurity in the Village, quietly contemplating nothing. But as a suspect or a defendant in a murder trial — well, her real name would get into the papers! That would do my firm no small damage. So, I should think that my offer of a \$5,000 retainer was not excessive.”

Wolfe didn’t either, of course. “I could accept that under the stipulation that I remain beholden to my original client to do the same thing. Find and expose the murderer, whoever it may be.”

“That’s understood,” Dunham said. He took out his checkbook.

When he had gone, Goodwin returned to the office.

“Gee,” he said. “That’s what I call fatherly love. His devotion to his daughter is such that he won’t let her sully the name of the firm. I hope he can write your fee off his income tax.”

Wolfe picked up his book. “Archie,” he said. “Have Saul here at 8:00 a.m.”

* * * * *

CHAPTER 7

I was sitting peacefully in the Café Wha?, having an espresso, listening to the piano player. In spite of all the worries I had about getting arrested, charged with murder, locked up on Death Row and marching down the last mile with some rented clergyman muttering in Latin, I had also been able to make some progress on my play. In fact, the negative emotions churning around inside me had somehow turned the second act into one of the best pieces of work I had ever done. And I had to admit, not having Harold around playing Judy Garland records and banging on pots was pretty blissful.

Suddenly the music stopped and the piano player came over and sat down at my table. He didn't look like much, with a big nose and a beat-up cap. His badly shaven face seemed to want to join his scraggly goat-ee.

"Ralph?" he asked.

"Yeah. Do I know you, baby?"

"Could be. I've been playing piano here for the last few days."

"Oh, yeah. No offense, but I don't think I noticed you."

He shrugged. "That happens a lot. My name is Saul Panzer and I actually work for Nero Wolfe. He has a message for you. His place at 9 o'clock."

He split the scene.

CHAPTER 8

It was another bang-up reception in Wolfe's office. Goodwin was making the rounds, taking drink orders. Saul Panzer, goatee recently shaved off, was in one of the chairs, watching things. I nodded to him, went over and told him that I thought he had done a wigged-out arrangement of "The High and the Mighty." He nodded back.

Linda Montieth was there, looking put upon. She kept muttering that she had been working all day and needed a break from it all, and ordering refills, with, however, a big smile for Goodwin every time he brought one.

Fred Frederson was there, looking calm, sipping Campari and soda. He was wearing the same suit he had worn to the previous meeting, and in fact every time I had seen him. It was either that or a precisely tailored copy, in the manner of Bert Brecht.

Thin Lizzie was sitting next to, but not near to, an old, rich-looking cat who turned out to be her father. He was looking very uncomfortable, surrounded by hipsters and detectives, both of which were well down the social scale.

Inspector Cramer, in a big red leather chair, was there, looking impatient and pre-choleric, but I figured that was how he presented himself to the world every day. Purley Stebbins was on his right.

Josh Holstein was sitting in one of the straight-back yellow chairs,

looking completely unperturbed by anything, drinking free beer. He had struck up a conversation with Purley Stebbins about side arms.

Then Wolfe entered. He inclined his head a percentage point as he circled around to his desk.

“I thank you all for coming,” he said “with, of course, one exception. That exception is the murderer of Harold Harold.”

Most of the room gasped. Cramer, Goodwin, and Stebbins had obviously been briefed and merely looked at the other faces. Thin Lizzie had the loudest reaction.

“Far out.”

Wolfe nodded, as if he expected nothing less. He turned to the group.

“This will go faster without interruption. Six days ago Mr. Winthrop came here and engaged me to speak to his roommate, the late Mr. Harold, about Mr. Harold’s deliberate sabotage of a play that Mr. Winthrop had been generously commissioned to write. Mr. Goodwin, who, by the way, Mr. Van Sween, is not my servant. He is a highly competent private investigator. He, along with Mr. Winthrop, undertook a visit to the apartment shared by Mr. Winthrop and Mr. Harold. Upon arrival they found Mr. Harold’s body, a victim of a gunshot wound to the head.

“Well. The police were of a mind that Mr. Winthrop had staged the entire event, including the murder, intending to use what reputation Mr. Goodwin and I have to buttress his claims of innocence. I doubted that. I doubted that he would try and dupe two people who make their living by not being easily fooled. At the same time, there was a nagging thought that he could be a subtle, egotistical criminal, too clever by half, attempting to gull both us and the authorities,. Accordingly, I dispatched another operative, Saul Panzer, who sits to your left, into the Village. Mr. Panzer, who is never gulled by anyone, went in the guise of one of the confused and somewhat artistically oriented denizens of that neighborhood, to find out what type of a man Mr. Winthrop was.”

“The hell you say,” Cramer rasped, almost good-naturedly. “Saul Panzer was reading poetry in basements?”

“He was playing whatever piano he could find, and he was, as always, keeping his ears and eyes open,” Wolfe said. “And, as is usually the case, he found what he was looking for. From what he told me, Mr. Winthrop possesses nowhere near enough cunning, nor even basic intelligence, to attempt something so ambitious.”

“Hey,” I said. “Like...”

“If you please,” Wolfe said. “So, coming to the conclusion that Mr. Winthrop is indeed of no more than average intelligence — this is not meant to wound you, sir — ”

“Yeah, but...”

“So what sort of devastating, bold, forward thinking, and innovative theatre is such a man to create? Surely nothing worth \$10,000.”

Wolfe sipped from his beer and I didn’t say anything.

“So, had he gulled Mr. Frederson? Had his most recent flop really been a work of undiscovered genius?”

“It was a load of crap!” said Linda, her first words since “Pour me another, handsome.”

“That seemed to the opinion of the world at large,” Wolfe said. “So why did Mr. Frederson bestow such an enormous sum on an unsuccessful and, at best, moderately talented writer? If you please?”

That was aimed at me. I was going to protest again. The thing that was getting under my skin was that, at least in theory, I was paying this guy.

“This is what I asked myself. I had almost nothing to go on, except a kernel of a clue. Mr. Winthrop said that he had come from Michigan, and was a high school friend of Mr. Harold. Is that true, Mr. Winthrop?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean...”

“Please,” Wolfe said. “Allow me to describe this properly. I also noted that Mr. Frederson was the heir to a motor coach trailer fortune. Motor City Truck Trailers. It is a well-known firm, even here, and its Detroit location is common knowledge. So it was not unreasonable to assume that Mr. Frederson, Mr. Winthrop, and Mr. Harold may have been previously acquainted, or connected in some way.”

Wolfe pushed his buzzer suddenly and the door opened. A tall guy, handsome and as dapper as Goodwin, walked in.

“I would like to introduce Orville Cather, a private investigator in my employ. Mr. Cather has been in Michigan, investigating the possibility of such a connection. Mr. Cather?”

Handsome cleared his throat. “In September of 1949 there was an industrial fire at one of the Motor City Truck Trailer assembly plants, in Detroit. Two people were burned to death. Mr. Frederson, at the time,

was the plant manager. He was learning the family business. When the **fire hit he ran out of the building without helping in any way. It wasn't** actionable, but it was called an extraordinary act of cowardice. One of the newspapers compared him to the men who put on dresses to get on a lifeboat when the Titanic went down.

“Mr. Frederson was never charged with anything, but he was black-balled from the automotive aristocracy, starting with the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club. He left town under a cloud, and spent two years in a European kind of exile, arriving here in 1953.

“Then he basically paid his way into the New York artistic circles, and no one was ever curious enough to find out more about him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cather.” Wolfe looked at Frederson. “Here, in a new society, you could again hold up your head. It is easy enough to earn respect — indeed, awe — by donating what seemed like huge sums to the arts. And that explained your generosity toward Mr. Winthrop. You didn't care where you tossed your money. It was all the same to you. You had no idea that Mr. Winthrop was from Michigan, or that his roommate would recognize you.

“Yes. Mr. Harold, as struggling artists do, was working in a factory in 1949. Your factory. And while you didn't know him, he certainly knew you. In a small social gathering, he would have recognized you. He did pester you that evening, as you said, and it did regard his epic poem, but he also mentioned that he had seen you before. At your factory. He told you that he knew who you were, and insinuated what might happen if you didn't finance his epic.”

“Would you like to comment, sir?”

Frederson did, but not to the point. “Mr. Winthrop's plays, as I said, open a creative manner of thinking that is otherwise blocked. Your remarks do nothing of the sort.”

“Waggish but irrelevant,” Wolfe replied. “It is not beyond belief that Mr. Harold saw the kind of opportunity he had dreamed about his entire life. Here was a wealthy patron of the arts with a dirty secret.”

“Every artist's dream,” said Holstein, wistfully. “A rich guy to squeeze.”

“Exactly, Mr. Holstein. Which I believe Mr. Harold proceeded to do. But he had picked the wrong patron.”

Wolfe turned to face Cramer. "Mr. Cramer, I haven't asked, but allow me a guess. The rubber gloves you found at the crime scene contained neither fingerprints nor residue from gunpowder. Is that the case?"

Cramer nodded slowly. "You knew that because we haven't put the arm on your beatnik."

"Quite true, sir. I had every confidence in your ability to analyze that particular clue, which of course turned out to be no clue at all. Thank you."

Wolfe buzzed again. Mutt and Jeff came in. A real big guy, bald, wearing a striped tie and a cheap suit with wide checks, accompanied by a little guy in a cloth cap and a windbreaker with a hackie's badge.

"I would like to introduce Mr. Fred Durkin, another investigator in my employ. With him is Mr. Morris Horwitz, who operates a Manhattan taxicab." He turned to the cabbie. "Mr. Horwitz?"

Horwitz blinked. "Yeh?" With that one word everyone in the room knew what kind of guy he was. A short, feisty type of hackie with loud, unalterable views on everything, the kind you get late at night when you're too tired to argue.

"Do you recognize anybody in this room?"

"Sure. The gentleman right there, with the gray suit." He pointed at Frederson. "Two days ago I picked him up on Park Avenue and I took him into the Village at 3:15 p.m. 128 MacDougal Street."

Cramer jumped up. "Just a minute! Horwitz, how do you happen to know exactly when?"

Horowitz jumped a bit himself. Wolfe cut in.

"This gentleman is a police officer, Inspector Cramer from Homicide South. "

"I know a cop when I hears one," Horwitz said. "I looked it up, officer, when Durkin here came around looking for whoever took a fare from Park Avenue to the Village. I looked in my record books to be sure, so I remembered the time then."

"Durkin offered a reward?" Cramer snapped.

"Sure he did. But he didn't tell me what for. It had to jibe with my fare sheet, which I had already turned in."

“Durkin showed you a picture and got you to ID this man?” Cramer pressed.

“Nah. He asked me to describe the fare here, which I done. Then he brought me here and I seen him. I mean this guy here in the gray suit.” He looked at Frederson. “How do you do, sir? Nice to see you again. Hope this don’t lead you to no trouble.”

Cramer sat back down.

“I wasn’t aware that hiring a taxi in New York City constituted suspicious behavior,” Frederson said.

No one responded. Wolfe wagged a finger.

“Mr. Frederson, this places you on very dangerous ground. This places you well within the category of opportunity. And we have, I should think, established motive. It leads one to believe that Mr. Harold had indeed recognized you at the gathering. You had given your grant to the **wrong refugee from Michigan, and Mr. Harold wasn’t having it. So he demanded a meeting and a payoff, at his flat the next day.**

“Mr. Cather has photocopied employment records that state one Harold Hrdlicka was indeed employed at your former firm at the time of the **1949 fire. Mr. Cramer, what was Mr. Harold’s real name?**”

“Harold Hrdlicka,” Cramer said, fixing Frederson with a very serious stare. Stebbins did better than that, he walked over and stood behind him.

“I knew it was you!” Linda cried. “Anybody that would pay Ralph Winthrop money to write plays is capable of anything!”

It’s a good thing Stebbins had moved. Frederson bolted out of his chair and made a running grab at her throat. Stebbins leapt forward and grabbed him, and wrestled him to the ground. He pulled out handcuffs and applied them.

Montieth looked startled, but it didn’t shut her up.

“Just what I thought, Frederson! You don’t know art! You killed a promising young poet — ”

“*Art??*” Frederson snarled. “You imbeciles don’t make art! You can’t spell art!! You lay around in filthy hovels convinced that you’re the next Lord Byron! You drink cheap beer! You play bongos! You criticize the real world! And you expect people like me to pay for it!

“Damn every one of you!” he yelled, as Cramer and Stebbins led him away.

Lizzie, as the cops dragged Frederson away, had the last word.

“Like, that was really far out.”

EPILOGUE

I had to testify at Frederson’s trial, of course, as did Goodwin, Linda, and everyone else but Wolfe. Wolfe apparently hates bestirring himself on official — or any other — business, and usually manages to get away with a sworn affidavit. The District Attorney really raked me over, because the 10 grand was already in my bank account, and they thought it might color my testimony.

But there wasn’t much I could say either for or against his guilt, and as it turned out, the DA could have saved himself the worry. But this whole affair changed us all, and no one more than Thin Lizzie. She actually started writing her poems down, starting with one to **Wolfe, which she called “Ode to a Man Shaped like a Grecian Urn.”**

Goodwin sent her a nice note of thanks:

“Dear Elizabeth, Mr. Wolfe and I both thank you for the poem. It was, I think I can say without fear of contradiction, truly far out.”

